



## Full length article

# Predicting changes in giving and receiving emotional support within a smartphone-based alcoholism support group



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined how giving and receiving emotional support in a smartphone-based alcoholism support group changed over time, and what factors predicted the changing patterns. Data were collected as part of a randomized clinical trial of testing a smartphone-based relapse prevention system for alcoholics. Findings suggested that giving and receiving emotional support in a smartphone-based alcoholism support group tended to decline over time. The initial value and growth rate of giving and receiving emotional support varied depending on the group participants' characteristics. These features should be considered in building strategies for the design and implementation of smartphone-based addiction support groups.

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## 1. Introduction

Alcohol use disorder are linked to a wide range of health and safety problems (Berglund & Ojehagen, 2006; Kushner, Abrams, & Borchardt, 2000; Morris, Stewart, & Ham, 2005). To address the problem of alcoholism, health care professionals offer a number of treatment options, including medications, behavioral therapies, screening, and mutual-help groups. Despite these offerings, most alcoholics still fail to receive appropriate treatment (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013). More alarming is the lack of extended continuing care in spite of the potentially chronic and relapsing nature of alcoholism (McTavish, Chih, Shah, & Gustafson, 2012).

To overcome these limitations, researchers are paying a great deal of attention to emerging mobile communication and network technologies (Gustafson et al., 2014; McTavish et al., 2012). In

particular, smartphone technology can assist those with alcohol use disorders in accessing online support groups in cost-effective, flexible, and efficient ways (McTavish et al., 2012). Online support groups are virtual meeting places for individuals with addiction or related problems to exchange social support (vanLear, Sheehan, Withers, & Walker, 2005). In such support groups, emotional support is frequently enacted through mutual communication actions (Coulson, 2014; vanLear et al., 2005).

Nevertheless, little is known about how emotional support is exchanged within smartphone-based support groups that utilize a different media platform distinct from desktop-based virtual communities. In particular, the exchange of emotional support may be likely to change over time because social interactions are dynamic, not static, in online support groups (Yoo et al., 2013). Given the dynamic and interactive features of online supportive communication, this study explores how giving and receiving emotional support in a smartphone-based alcoholism support group change over time, and what factors predict the changing patterns of giving and receiving emotional support over the course of support group engagement.

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## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Exchanging emotional support in smartphone-based addiction support groups

Emotional support is defined as the provision of love, empathy, caring, and trust (House, 1981). It is rendered through information that leads individuals to believe they are cared for and loved, esteemed, and valued and that they belong to a network of communication and mutual obligation (Cobb, 1976). In recent years, emotional support has been exchanged through online communication using smartphones (McTavish et al., 2012). Smartphones are drawing particular attention in that their portability, affordability, availability, and feasibility are effective at developing social networks for exchanging emotional support among chronically ill patients. Thus, social networking via smartphones can be used to give and receive emotional support among members of a community.

Previous research has shown that alcoholic patients exchange emotionally supportive messages in online support groups (Chuang & Yang, 2012; Cunningham, van Mierlo, & Fournier, 2008; Finfgeld-Connett, 2009). Given the growing popularity and advantages of smartphones, it is plausible that smartphone-based support groups create a virtual environment open to sharing emotional support among people with alcohol problems. Individuals with chronic diseases tend to regard smartphone-based support groups as peer-to-peer online communities (Fukuoka, Kamitani, Bonnet, & Lindgren, 2011). In addition, they use smartphone-based support groups to connect with other patients (Muessig et al., 2013). A recent intervention study found that smartphone-based support groups provided participants with emotional and informational support, and such support was particularly effective at fulfilling the needs going unmet in face-to-face settings (McLaughlin et al., 2012).

### 2.2. Changing patterns in giving and receiving emotional support

Albrecht and Adelman (1987) argued that “social support refers to verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers that helps manage uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one’s life experience” (p. 19). Thus, researching social support as a communication situation entails studying the dynamic interactions in which people provide and receive social support messages.

Given that emotional support is mainly exchanged through conversational interactions, emotionally supportive communication can be classified into two major types of behaviors. One type is the giving of emotional support, which refers to the actual offering or conveying of emotionally supportive actions that match the type of support sought by a person facing life strain and stress (Nurullah, 2012). The other type is the receiving of emotional support, which refers to the reception of emotional support from close confidants or others, such as family members, friends, or colleagues (Schulz & Schwarzer, 2004). More specifically, Nurullah (2012) defined the reception of emotional support as “the experience of receiving actions and behavior that are considered supportive by the recipient in fostering emotional needs, which match the types of support sought by the recipient with ones that are provided by close relations and significant others in an effort to improve well-being and effectively deal with life crisis” (p. 174). Along these lines, some communication scholars have distinguished the features and effects of giving and receiving emotional support in online support groups (Han et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2012; Namkoong et al., 2013; Yoo et al., 2014).

Unlike regular clinic visits or other routine health-related behaviors, such as taking medication, patients’ participation in online social support systems is not constant over time. In e-Health research, the law of attrition is used to describe the patients’ decreasing engagement of such systems over a period of use (Eysenbach, 2005). Indeed, various studies have reported a decline in system use over time among patients who use interactive health communication systems to access online social support for different types of chronic or life threatening illnesses, such as addiction, asthma, diabetes, cancer, and chronic heart failure (Gustafson et al., 2012; Jimison et al., 2008; McTavish et al., 2012).

Although some researchers have attributed this type of usage attenuation to a number of possible causes, such as reduced motivation or technology inconvenience (especially for web-based systems), very few of these researchers have actually studied the reasons of this phenomena (Jimison et al., 2008). Compared to traditional, web-based support groups that often require patients to sit in front of a computer, smartphones provide a more convenient way to access online social support at any time and almost anywhere thanks to wireless broadband connections. Although smartphone technology appears to be more novel than a desktop or laptop computer, the uniqueness and convenience of smartphone-based support groups do not help resolve the issue of use attrition. McTavish et al. (2012) found the usual decreasing pattern of system use in terms of the number of pages read in three smartphone-based support systems for asthma, colon cancer and alcohol addiction.

From these findings, we would expect to see decreasing trends of both message expression and reception activities in smartphone-based support groups. However, a decreasing number of messages posted or read may not necessarily lead to the conclusion that patients provide or receive a reduced amount of support over time. This is because the potential variability of support content in each of the messages. For example, a small number of messages could contain robust support, while many messages may yield only a limited amount of support. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the changing patterns of emotional support provision and reception via this smartphone-based social support system in more systematic and nuanced ways. In line with this objective, the following research questions are proposed.

RQ1: How does giving emotional support change in a smartphone-based alcoholism support group over time?

RQ2: How does receiving emotional support change in a smartphone-based alcoholism support group over time?

### 2.3. Potential predictors of changes in giving and receiving emotional support

#### 2.3.1. Sociodemographic backgrounds

In past research, a strong predictor of participation in online support groups is young age. Younger patients tend to report unmet needs with regard to information and psychological support (Zebrack, 2008; Zebrack et al., 2013). In addition, younger patients are more trusting of the Internet than older patients. Previous research has found that younger patients are more likely to participate in online patient support groups (Dutta & Feng, 2007; Han et al., 2010; Mo & Coulson, 2010; van Uden-Kraan et al., 2011). Given the high levels of motivation and participation in online support groups, younger patients may be more inclined to give and receive emotional support in smartphone-based support groups over time.

Gender is also an important factor in predicting the communication of social help in online support groups. In general, women

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